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FEARSOME MONSTERS OF EARLY DAYS

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THE reading of natural history has ever been a popular pastime among young and old. As living beings we are supremely interested in the phenomenon of life; first as it is manifested in creatures of our own kind, and second as we see its animating power vitalizing the many animal forms about us. We take keen delight, moreover, in hearing accounts of the curious and the strange; in listening to tales of hunters of big game as they tell us of extraordinary creatures in lands beyond the sea, or in reading the narratives of whalers who describe the habits of the monsters of the deep. We know much, in general, concerning the animal life of the world today, at least concerning those creatures large enough, or common enough to have made their presence known to man. Through the medium of photography, through the collections of living forms in our zoological gardens, and through foreign travel, we have become familiar with the appearance of many creatures, with which we would not otherwise have been acquainted.

The peoples of earlier days, however, were less fortunately situated with respect to ease of acquiring natural knowledge. Their sources of information in this field were a meagre collection of works, compiled in the main from the ancient writers, and the tales of a limited number of credulous travelers.

Few persons, perhaps, know with what sort of creatures the world of the early naturalists was populated. Doubtless many of us remember the tales of the griffin, unicorn, dragon, and others, which were told to us out of the old rhymes and fairy stories of our childhood. These were glorious creatures, never failing to appeal to the imaginative instincts which make childhood so attractive a period to us as we look back upon it from the world of unpoetic realities! The dragon and unicorn and their ilk, have survived the times and have passed into the literature of the race. But they represent only a fraction of the vast host of marvelous creatures, whose names and attributes are now known only to scholars; creatures in whom the early writers and their readers placed full confidence; creatures which were soberly discussed and pictured in the early volumes of natural history.

Books on natural history were extremely popular in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries; and as soon as the art of printing (introduced about 1450) had made available to a large number of

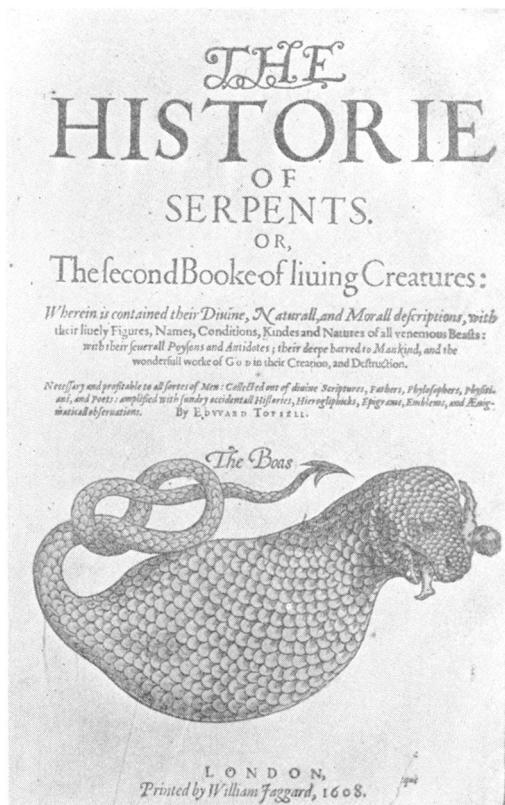


FIG. 1. TITLE PAGE OF EDW. TOPSELL'S "HISTORIE OF SERPENTS"

readers the works of the early naturalists, interest in the fearsome creatures reported from strange lands beyond the sea and little known oceans became widespread. This is not surprising. Many of these early works were embellished with illustrations which could not fail to catch the eye and enchain the interest, even of the most casual. And then the text! Even today, who can read, for example, these words from the famous "Voyages and Travels of Sir John Mandeville" without a thrill of wonder, so convincing is the exuberance and certainty of the glowing phraseology! The passage I quote is from that portion of the "Travels" in which the author is describing the inhabitants of various islands, or "yles", as he calls them, in some far southern ocean;

And in another yle are foule men that have the lippes about the mouth so greate, that when they sleepe in the sonne they cover theyr face with the lippe. And in another yle are lytte men, as dwarfes, and have no mouth, but a lyttle rounde hole & through that hole they eate theyr meate with a pipe, & they have no tongue, & they speake not, but they blow & whistle, and so make signes to one another. In Ethiope are such men as have but one foote, and they go so fast yt is a great marvaill, and that is a large foote, that the

shadow thereof covereth ye body from son or rayne, when they lye upon their backes; and when theyr children be first borne they loke like russet and when they waxe olde then they be all black.

It appears that the most credulous times were during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. No tales which travelers brought from remote lands or seas, no statements taken out of early writers, were too gross for belief. Quite naturally the less accessible the lands from which the travelers returned, the less frequented the seas over which the adventurous mariners voyaged, the more grotesque and fearful were the monsters reported as having been seen, partially seen,



FIG. 2. TITLE PAGE OF ALBERTUS MAGNUS' "THIERBUCH"

or heard of. The natural histories of these days were not, it can be seen, records of careful observations by trained observers. They were a mixture of travelers' tales and compilations of earlier authors. Much of this compiled material was from Pliny, who in his turn had drawn upon Aristotle, and others. The "physiologus" and the various bestiaries also furnished an abundance of animal anecdote, chiefly mythical.

These early books are by no means dull reading, even today. They teem with curious anecdotes concerning all sorts of marvelous creatures,

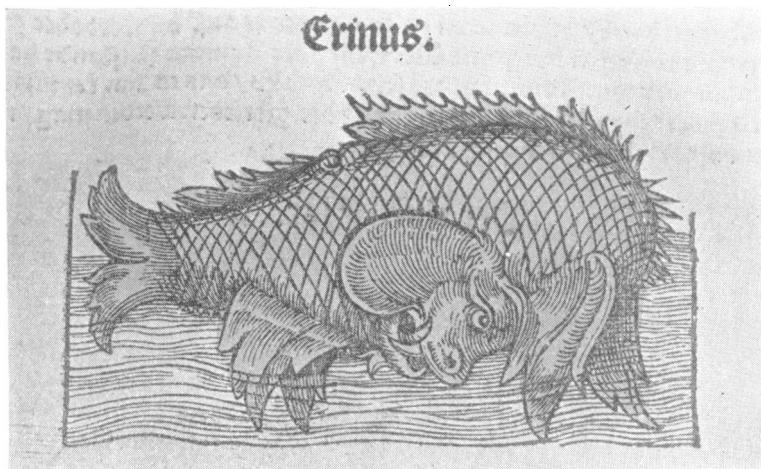


FIG. 3. THE ERINUS FROM ALBERTUS MAGNUS' "THIERBUCH"



Zedrosus ist ein Meerwunder / der art der Walfisch / baltert sich in
Arabischem meer / von seinen ryppen pflegt man in solchem Landt / starre
bogen vnd gewelb / vnd andere gebey inn kostlichen gebewen / vnd Rö
niglichen Palisten zubawen / denn man findet der rippē oder mittel grad
dieses Fisches / die etwan aufz xl. schul lang sindt.

FIG. 4. THE ZEDROSUS, FROM ALBERTUS MAGNUS' "THIERBUCH"



FIG. 5. THE UNICORN, FROM EDW. TOPSELL'S "HISTORIE OF FOUR-FOOTED BEASTES"

creatures who are described either as of positive benefit to man or as of positive evil. Note for example the naive way in which Topsell, in the title page of his "Historie of Serpents" (Fig. 1) describes them as bearing "deepe hatred to Mankind." The title page referred to also gives us a hint of the manner of compiling these early natural histories, for Topsell tells us that his accounts are, "Collected out of diuine Scriptures, Fathers, Phylosophers, physitians, and Poets: amplified with sundry accidentall Histories, Heirogliphicks, Epigrams, Emblems, and Aenigmatical obseruations." Who can doubt that a book heralded by so enticing a title page would engross the interest of even the most casual general reader? And the frontispiece! Could anyone pass over it in apathy? Would not the terrible Boas here shown be the ogre of childhood, the fear of the traveler, the subject of countless discussions and yarns among all sorts and conditions of men? In comparison with some of the marvelous "beastes" of primitive zoology how insipid and uninteresting are our "real" creatures of today. How can even a ninety-foot sperm whale, blowing his column of pearly spray high in the air, compete successfully in interest with a fire-breathing dragon, whose scales were of gold, and who withered and blasted by his very glance?

The illustrations in this article were photographed from several of the most important of the early works on natural history, books which are now extremely rare and to be found only in college libraries or in extensive collections. They represent creatures, which, in the opinion

of the writer, touch the pinnacle of the absurd in imaginative zoological conception.. With the exception of the unicorn and the basilisk, they are practically unknown except to students of the history of zoological thought.

It must not be supposed that the only interest attaching to these curious creatures of bygone days is in the amusement they afford. To the historian of zoology they are significant as indicative of various epochs in the development of biological conceptions.

With the unicorn and the sea-serpent (Fig. 7) we are already somewhat familiar. In Fig. 5 is shown Topsell's superb illustration of the former, and surely no unicorn figured in any of the other early writers, rejoiced in the possession of a more impressive horn? In this figure is also shown a portion of the quaint old text. Topsell's phraseology is most rich quaint, and yet graceful. Listen, as he discourses "of the Unicorne" . . . by the Unicorne wee doe understand a peculiar beaste, which hath naturally but one horne, and that a very rich one that groweth out of the middle of the foreheade. . . . Likewise the Bulls of *Aonia* are saide to have hooves and one horne growing out of the middle of their foreheads. . . . Now our discourse of the Unicorne is of none of these beasts for their is not any vertue attributed to their horns." He tells us that there is a "vertue" in the horn of the unicorn, but that there are many who cannot believe that this is so. Of this "vertue," he say, "ther were more proofes in the world, because of the noblenesse of his horn. . . . they have ever been in doubt: by which distraction it appeareth unto me that there is some secret enemy in the inward degenerate nature of man, which continually blindeth the eies of God his people from beholding and beleeving the greatnessse of God his workes."

The Gorgon (Fig. 6) is another of Topsell's famous illustrations, to be found on the title page of his "Historie of the Four Footed Beastes".

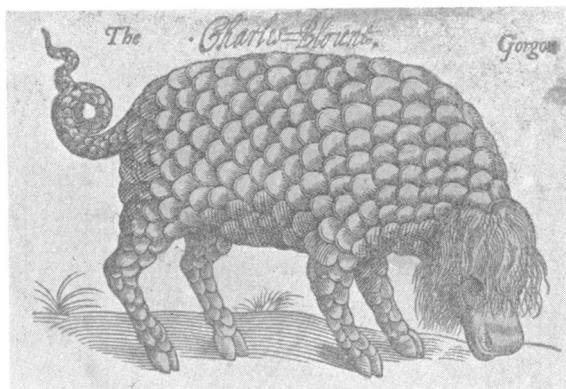


FIG. 6. THE GORGON, FROM THE TITLE PAGE OF EDW. TOPSELL'S
"HISTORIE OF FOUR-FOOTED BEASTES"

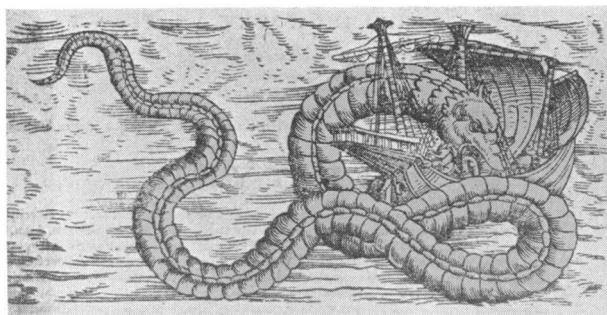


FIG. 7. THE SEA SERPENT, FROM KONRAD GESNER'S "HISTORIAE ANIMALIUM,"
COPIED FROM OLAUS MAGNUS

Topsell's chief interest was in the larger forms of animal life, as his work, in two parts, attests.

In Ulysses Aldrovandus, however, we find a naturalist to whom the lowlier forms of life made more appeal. His tremendous folio volume on insects and other primitive creatures, published in Latin in 1602, contains many curious forms not known to zoologists of the present day. Fig. 8 is one of these bizarre forms, a snail, whose remarkable fore limbs are of no less anatomical interest than they are of artistic conception. It is a curious and noteworthy thing how often the early naturalists depicted their beasts with these rather pleasing, leaf-like appendages, slashed into fringes and lobes. No doubt they thought that this gave an artistic "finish" to the beasts, as it indisputably does. In this connection compare the appendages of the creatures in Fig. 9 with Erinus (Fig. 3) and Zedrosus (Fig. 4).

The sea-serpent has been with us from time immemorial and in some sections of the country belief in it still lingers with tenacious hold. Fig. 7, taken from Konrad Gesner's "Historiae animalium" shows a mediaeval conception of this terror of the sea, a conception which certainly depicts the serpent in all his fabulous terrors. Note the ease with which he arches his back and selects out the fattest seaman of

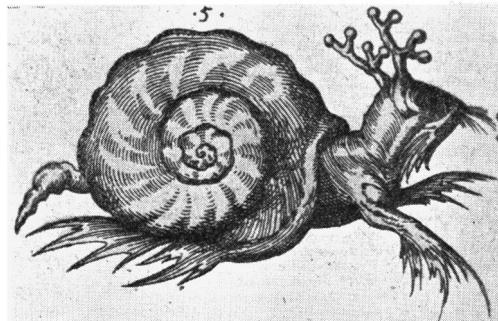


FIG. 8. A UNIQUE SNAIL, COCHLEA, FROM ALDROVANDUS' "DE ANIMALIBUS"

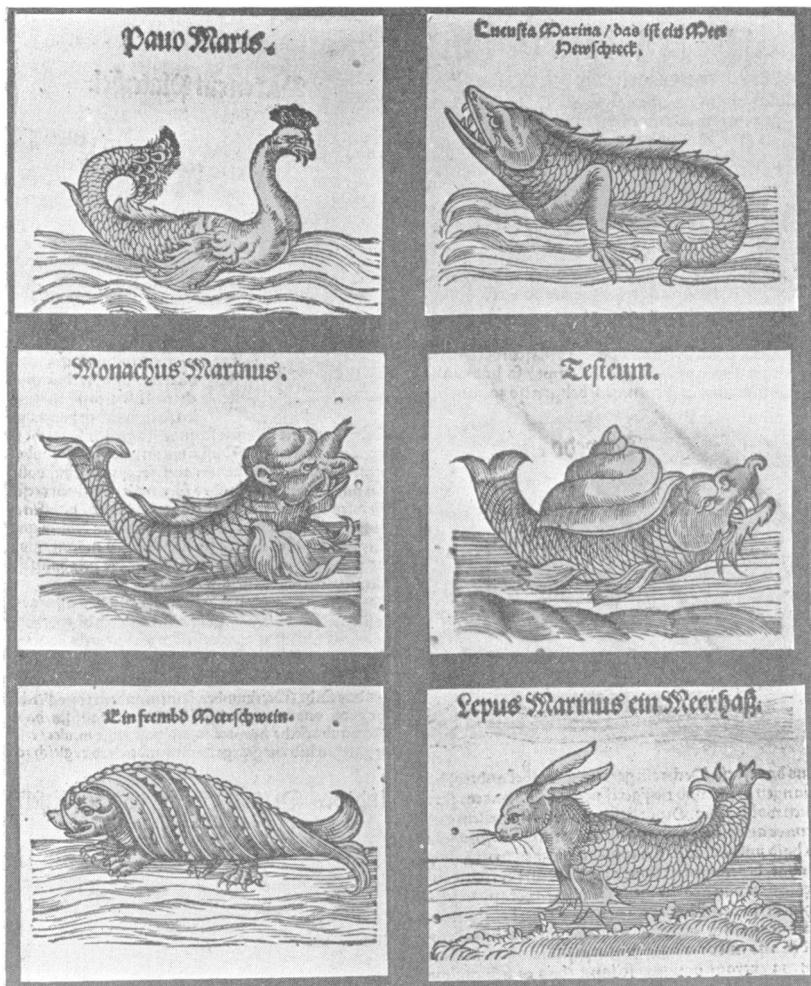


FIG. 9. A GROUP OF SEA MARVELS OR "MEERWUNDERN," FROM ALBERTUS MAGNUS' "THIERBUCH"

the crew of the helpless vessel. Of illustrations of sea-serpents there are legion. This one I have selected as fulfilling perhaps our most morbid notions of a creature, than whom nothing more awful exists in the sea of our imagination.



FIG. 10. AN ASSORTMENT OF "DRAGONS AND CHIMAERAS DIRE." FROM ALBERTUS MAGNUS, TOPSELL, ALDROVANDUS AND GESNER

Dragons, chimaeras, basilisks, cockatrices, and gorgons, seemed to have exerted a by no means meagre fascination for the early writers. Accounts of them are numerous and lengthy in almost all of the old works. Nor were their habits less strange than their forms. Of fierce and vindictive dispositions, in league often with the Evil One himself, breathing fire, and blasting or killing by their very glance or touch, they formed a theme upon which the credulous old naturalists were never tired of descanting. In Fig. 10 is shown a group of typical "dragons and chimaeras dire" from Albertus Magnus, Aldrovandus, Topsell, and Gesner. Topsell in his long discussion of dragons, says of one sort: "Their aspect is very fierce and grimme, and whensoever they move uppon the earth, their eyes give a sound from theyr eyeliddes, much like unto the tinkling of Brasse. . . ." And again, speaking of the classification of dragons he says: "There be some dragons which have wings, and no feete, some again have both feete and wings, and some neither feete nor wings, but are onely distinguished from the common sort of Serpents by the combe growing uppon their heads and the beard under their cheekees."

Those, however, who wish to be ushered into a world more populous in bizarre and marvelous animal forms than any other of which the writer is aware, have but to open the magic door of Albertus

Magnus' immortal "Thierbuch," unfortunately for those who read no language but English, written in rather antiquated German. A copy of this rare work (printed in 1545), in heavy embossed leather with brass clasps, and riddled with bookworm holes, fell into the author's hands recently. From it were photographed the title page (Fig. 2) and the "Meerwundern", or sea marvels (Fig. 9), Albertus Magnus begins his pretentious work with the story of Adam and Eve (so as to be certain that he makes a start from the very beginning) and then follows this with accounts of all sorts of creatures; accounts illustrated with figures beautifully drawn, and embellished, in many cases, with artistic flourishes of the artist's own. In the figure of the Zedrosus (Fig. 4) is included some of the text, a beautiful example of the artistic typography of the times. The letters are clear, bold, and easily read, and the style of the font of type pleasing in its proportions. In Fig. 9 is shown a group of sea marvels, or "Meerwundern", a title which no one would presume to dispute. In the writer's opinion, however the Ultima Thule of absurdity is attained in the conception of the beast Erinus (Fig. 3). Albertus (no wonder he was accorded the title of "the great") says of this creature: "Erinus is also a fish in the water which has its mouth and face bent down under itself, and the opening for the excreta located above." He tells us that, according to Pliny it is feared by other fishes, and that its flesh is red, like cinnabar. Truly a fearful "Wunder" was the Erinus.

It might appear that the author is in sympathy with the early writers only when they happen to afford amusement. This is far from being the case. No one can read the early writers without a smile, it is true; nevertheless he is a blind reader indeed who cannot detect the true purpose of these sturdy though credulous old naturalists, who cannot perceive that their one ambition was to further the bounds of natural knowledge, to glorify the Creator by showing forth the wonders of His works, and lastly, and in this case also least, to acquire some renown for themselves.

In conclusion listen to these words of Topsell, in his Epilogue to the "Historie of Four Footed Beastes":

If you think my endeavours and the Printers costs necessarie and commendable, and if you woud ever farther or second a good enterprise, I do require al men of conscience that shall ever read, hear, or see these Histories or wish for the sight of the residue, to helpe us with knowledge, and to certifie their particular experiences of any kinde, or any one of the living Beastes: and withall to consider how great a task we do undertake, travelling for the content and benefit of other men, and therefor how acceptable it would be unto us, and procure everlasting memorie to themselves to be helpers, incouragers, ayders, procurers, maintainers, and abbettours, to such a labor and needfull endeavor, as was never before enterprized in England.